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BULGARIA: THE DYNAMIC IN THE BALKAN SITUATION

By Mason W. Tyler, Ph.D.

That in Bulgaria we have today the main factor in the solution of the Balkan situation is hardly to be doubted by anyone conversant with the state of affairs there. As Prussia in the past so has Bulgaria linked her future to the possession of a strong army, backed by a prosaic, hard-working but earnest nation. Servia met her Sadowa a quarter-century ago at Slivnitsa, and should Turkey interfere there is every probability that she will meet the fate that came to France at Sedan. Moreover, it is with no static force we are dealing, but a progressive nation whose throbs of energetic life are felt by all who come within her borders: the true dynamic in the Balkan situation.

First we must give some attention to the Bulgaria of the past for it has in many ways influenced the Bulgaria of the present and will undoubtedly influence the Bulgaria of the future. Into the vacant spaces left by the migrating Goths at the period of the downfall of the Empire in the West came new, strange tribes, of a race allied to the Slavs, yet of uncertain origin, and among these are the modern Bulgars. Arriving in the latter part of the ninth century they built up, almost at once, an empire nearly coterminous with the Balkan peninsula, extending from Salonika on the south to the Danube on the north. More than once their armies appeared before the trembling imperial city on the Bosphorus, but always the superior skill of the Greek prevailed over the savage courage of the Bulgar and prevented the capture of the city. Indeed under a capable line of Emperors the empire managed to take the offensive and even reconquer Bulgaria itself, but only for a brief season, and then a new Bulgarian Empire, even more glorious than the

old, arose and became the most powerful state in the Balkans. From Tirnova the imperial city in the gorges of the Jantra went forth edicts that were obeyed throughout the peninsula. To show his hatred for Constantinople and to win from the West the confirmation of his title one emperor carried his whole people over to the Roman church and this edict was obeyed without question. But as the central power grew weaker under less capable rulers, internal anarchy set in and the Bulgarian state was nearly destroyed when the attacks of the Turks gave it the finishing touch, and it fell in utter ruin.

But it was not without its influence for it served to the Bulgarian patriot the same service as did the old German Empire to the lover of German unity. And as in Germany in the early part of the last century we had an idealization of the old empire, so today we have in Bulgaria a like idealization of the power their forefathers wielded. It was for this reason that Ferdinand was proclaimed on a bleak hill-top in one of the out-of-the-way cities of his dominion, for the city was Tirnova and the hill-top was the site of the old palace of the Bulgarian Tsars.

From 1393 to the middle of the last century we may reckon the dark ages of Bulgarian history. The country was so crushed down by Turkish governors that all remembrance of national life was lost and most of the inhabitants imagined themselves Greeks. A number of the people, probably considering it the sole way not only to advancement but even to safety, went over to the Mahomedan religion, forming the body of Pomarchs, despised alike by true Mahomedan and faithful Bulgarian. Under the unenlightened rule art and industry vanished and the country retrograded into a state of half-civilization from which it has not yet wholly recovered.

But with the turn in the century came a change of conditions. The extension of railways, the increase of travel that brought the people more into touch with European civilization, together with the efforts of Russia to stir up Slavonic national life under her leadership resulted, in the years between 1850 and 1875, in a series of revolts in the Bal-

kan states. In this movement Bulgaria had its part. National committees were formed in Roumania which aided by the Greek priests, resisted all attempts to put it down. Turkey's answer to this was to quarter in 1859 half a million wild Tartars on the population. From that time on, there was a complete reign of terror in Bulgaria. One can now see its traces; the old Roman Road along which they drove their Christian captives to the Constantinople slave-market, the villages sunk deep in the narrow valleys to escape observation. But burning and harrying failed, villages burnt down were rebuilt again and a steady resistance maintained. This state of affairs culminated in the famous Bulgarian horrors of 1876. Then came the war of 1878 in which the Bulgarians performed prodigies of valor, and with it the recognition of Bulgarian independence and the cession to her of the present kingdom plus the greater part of Macedonia.

It is unnecessary to trace the measures which led up to the treaty of Berlin. Suffice it to say that this independent kingdom was divided into three parts, Bulgaria proper, that was erected into a principality, Eastern Roumania which was given autonomy under a Christian governor, and Macedonia, which was unreservedly given back to the Turks. For the national feelings of these Balkan peoples the Berlin negotiators cared not a whit and Bulgaria, although it had formed its government and had called Prince Alexander of Battenberg to the throne, was forced to acquiesce in the diminishing of its territory and the loss of its sovereign power.

The next five years were filled with intrigue and counter intrigue. Russia had assisted in the freedom of the Slavonic states in the hope that she might eventually make them part of her empire. She hoped that internal dissensions would cripple the new Balkan states and make Russian interference a necessity, for the sake of preserving order. For her design Alexander was by far too strong a man and she did not look on the new strength of Bulgaria with any favor. Alexander did his best to retain Russian friendship and at the same time please his people but the two were contra-

dictory and events soon came that brought on a crisis, destined to ruin Russian influence in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian prince together.

In 1885 the situation in the Balkan peninsula was much like that of Germany in 1866. Servia had been independent for about three-quarters of a century, and it had been her constant dream to unite around her the Balkan states in a confederation. To her the rise of Bulgaria was dangerous to a high degree and it became one of her cardinal ideas to check it at the first possible opportunity. In 1885 she thought her chance had come when Alexander, taking advantage of a revolution in Eastern Roumelia, definitely annexed it to Bulgaria. Under the specious pretext of upholding the Berlin Treaty, Servia invaded Bulgaria suddenly at a time when her troops were mainly occupied in the south. But here the Bulgarian army for the first time showed its mettle. While with a small force the Bulgarians held the position at Slivnitza against Servian attack the Roumelian militia after forced marches of unheard-of length arrived in time to complete the rout. The road to Belgrade lay open and only Austrian intervention saved Servia from territorial loss.

This war is, as I have said, the Balkan war of '66. It settled forever the dream of Servian hegemony, yet brought very near the dominance of Bulgaria. But Russia, to whom the idea of a prosperous and growing Bulgaria was gall and wormwood was enraged and it struck hard at the man whom it held responsible for all this prosperity. Then began a series of disgraceful plots, aided, to their infamy, by several Bulgarian officers who hoped to profit by the internal anarchy in the country. Alexander was kidnapped, then, in the face of the furious outcry of the Bulgarian people, allowed to return, but he had seen the power of Russia and in a moment of weakness he abdicated leaving in Bulgaria a memory that is revered as that of his successor, despite his abilities, will never be.

From this abdication dates the new Bulgaria. The storm and stress were over, the Bulgarians were allowed to retain Eastern Roumelia and the country enjoyed a period of

peaceful development that is still continuing. To lead this movement the new Bulgarian prince was eminently fitted.

Cautious, slow-going but steady, unscrupulous in his use of means, despising nothing provided it will bring him a bit nearer his desired end, Ferdinand has earned a high place among nation-builders. Whatever you may think of his moral qualities, no one can doubt his capability, his general fitness for the circumstances. For consider his position twenty-five years ago and compare it with that today: Russia conspicuously unfriendly, wanting to stir up internal dissensions so she could fish in troubled waters, the rest of Europe lukewarm, no one recognizing him, his own subjects looking on him with unfriendly eyes. Against all this he has had to struggle, and in addition he has further alienated his subjects by his adherence to the Roman Catholic Church, by his love of pomp and by his cold manners. And yet if his subjects do not love him, they at least admire him, and that is probably all Ferdinand wants. Again, he has one great advantage, too often overlooked in America, but very well known in Sofia and that is that he is a foreigner. It is that very fact, at first sight a disadvantage that prevents the king from becoming a mere party head, as has been the case in Servia. His aloofness from all parties renders him superior to all and enables him to work for the good of his country. And that is of especial importance in the Balkan states where politics is a very serious business, for every party is in alliance with some outside power who is trying to use it to further its own ends in the country; for instance, the conservative party is pro-Russian. The very aloofness, then, goes to make the king the more free from outside powers and thus the more Bulgarian.

Now to turn from the king to the country itself, Bulgaria is a wedge of some 38,000 square miles driven in from the Black Sea into the Balkan Peninsula and has a population of about 4,000,000 souls. The country is, on the whole, mountainous and resembles to a considerable degree parts of the southern portion of Wyoming. But the strategic importance of the country is out of all proportion either to its size or to its population for it commands absolutely the

Balkan passes leading from the Danube to Constantinople. So natural conditions would force it, even were it not for the disposition of its chiefs to keep up a large standing army. Even though mountainous there is considerable fertile land in the river valleys and Bulgaria ranks second in European countries in the production of wheat.

The government is, at least nominally, exceedingly liberal. Every Bulgarian subject is a free elector and all who can read and write are eligible for office. But as a matter of fact the Sobranje only meets for about six weeks in the year, and the real government is in the hands of the ministry, who have of late been pretty closely dependent on the crown. Intimidation is freely used, and unpleasant candidates are advised to resign, or else "take a trip to Paris." In case this does not secure the desired effect, and particularly if the Macedonian Committee is involved, assassination is very likely to be tried, but these cases are comparatively rare.

The leading cities are Sofia, Philipopols and Ruschuk. The former, with about 100,000 people, is a clean, well-built city with public buildings that are only exceeded in the Balkan states by those of Bucharest, and indeed the new Cathedral is finer than any church in the Roumanian city. The streets are well paved, the shops, in the better portion of the city at least, have all the appearance of those of Western Europe. But in wandering around the city the traveler feels that a very thin veneer of German manufacture has been laid over the old Tartar life and it would only need a very slight scratch to bring back the old nomadic life with its tents, its flocks and herds and its lack of settled habitation. Nor is this impression dissipated by seeing the country folk as they come in to the weekly market. Clad in their home-spun woolens, dyed in bright colors, the men with their sheep-skins over their shoulders they are not people that one would meet in any western city. And there they sit along the sidewalks, unregenerate, as if in protest against the government that would graft this foreign German civilization upon their sturdy Bulgarian life.

Should the traveler approach Bulgaria from the Danube, the gradual entrance into the Orient is much more percep-

tible than is the swifter entry by railway. If in no other way than by the substitution of Turkish coffee instead of the Viennese brand at dinner, one feels after leaving Orsova that he has entered a new world. New strange forms appear on the docks, the minarets appear in the towns along the banks; the Orient looms before him. But Ruschuk is to the Western traveler at the first view disappointing, the new town where the steamboats land being populated mainly by Germans and other foreigners who have come there on business, and smacking distinctly of a Western "boom-city." But when one pushes back into the old town another world opens. Not that the town in itself has anything so peculiarly Oriental—the likeness to the new Western city still holds. There are the same two-story business blocks, generally of wood, the same wide, muddy street, the same half-done appearance with a handsome building and right next to it a vacant lot full of old cans, scrap-iron and garbage. Two things there are, however, that call you back, one the mosques, the other the appearance here and there of the old Turkish khans, low, windowless, whitewashed, sprawling over the earth with their courtyards and ramifying ells; sole survivors of a régime that has passed away forever. But it is not so much these even that make Ruschuk Oriental: it is above all the people. In one half-hour's walk on the streets you can see all the peoples of the Orient, Bulgarian civilized in West European dress, Bulgarian uncivilized in home-spun and sheepskin, Turks sitting chatting outside the coffee-houses, Gypsies, unkempt but picturesque, Jews with here and there a foreigner from Western Europe to make up the kaleidoscope. For Ruschuk far more than Sofia has kept the cosmopolitan element, the Turk having left the latter city forever after the fatal days of 1878 when he saw his house and furniture used for fuel to keep warm the Russian giaour. But in Ruschuk he is everywhere, making up a considerable portion of the life of the city. Finally along the wharves that line the Danube and in the streets of the new town you get the Bulgarian of Sofia, the most repellent type of all, the half-civilized nomad who has clothed him-

self in a pair of ragged trousers and a dirty shirt and says, "Lo! I am a European." Yet he adds the required touch to make the picture complete and give the traveler, in this small space of Ruschuk, a cross section of Bulgaria.

But the city represents only a small part of Bulgarian life. Nearly three-quarters of the Bulgarian population is still engaged in agricultural pursuits, though of course, as civilization advances and the country becomes more industrialized an influx to the cities will take place. The land is nominally in the hands of the crown but the perpetual tenure which the peasants hold gives them virtual possession. In return for this tenure and to cover all taxes one-tenth of the produce is paid to the government: a state of affairs that will compare favorably with any country in Europe. Nor does prosperity, of a good substantial style fail them. The peasants' houses are neat and clean, and fully as pretentious as those of the German peasants. The Turkish régime has left its imprint on the architecture with its low square type, one story in height, while in its whitewashed walls and thatched roof it is much like the peasants' houses of Western Europe. In some cases, where the supply of wood is plentiful we find wooden houses gaily painted but the forests thirty years ago existed only in name, and even now, despite careful and well-trained husbandry are of no great extent. In general the villages are much like those of early New England: the houses huddled together, the fields often two, three and four miles from the home of the farmer. Out of these villages in the early morning light pour the entire population to return at night, leaving perhaps the younger children to prepare and bring out the scanty noon meal. The whole family as soon as they arrive at a working age turn in at the field work, but, as far as I could see, did not make a chore of their work but laughed and chattered as they performed their tasks. Often several families joined together to perform the field work by rotation. The methods of agriculture were, in the districts I visited, a trifle crude, but slowly improved farming machinery is being introduced, although the system of small tenures is an impediment to this.

Perhaps the greatest progress made in the last thirty

years has been in the improvement of communications. In 1879 there were only 140 miles of railway in all Bulgaria, consisting of the line from Ruschuk on the Danube to Varna on the Black Sea. At the present moment there are nearly 900 miles in full operation and the standard of comfort in traveling in Bulgaria is fully as high as anywhere in Europe. The locomotives are of German build and the lines, though owned by the state and entirely run by Bulgarians, show a distinct German method, probably acquired from the old Oriental Railway, a German line. The roads are on the whole as good as the average in America and their extent has been nearly trebled in the last thirty years, while equally great strides have been made in opening up telephone and telegraph connections and in extending the postal system.

Education has also made rapid strides. The 1880 illiteracy was the general rule all over the country. All higher training was found outside of Bulgaria where the student forgot his country and, even if he did not, often returned out of sympathy with and usefulness for her. Now over 90 per cent of the city population can read and write and the standard is nearly as high in the country districts. Moreover there is a university at Sofia which, considering the circumstances does remarkably good work and in which the attendance is nearly 1000. As a result, a new art and literature are springing up founded on the old Bulgar lines which in due time may be expected to bring forth important results.

One cannot close this picture of present day Bulgaria without speaking of what is probably its most omnipresent future—its army, for wherever you go be it city or village you are very apt to see marching along the highway a little squad of these soldiers in their dust-brown uniforms, chanting their monotonous marching-song. The strength of this army is very little understood in Western Europe but no one who has seen them will doubt their ability to defeat Turk or Servian if necessity arises. Formed originally on Russian lines by Alexander, officered by Russians, it got its baptism of fire at Slivnitsa; be it remembered, too, after all its superior officers had left it. Since the defeat of Russia by Japan the army has swung more to German lines,

although it has copied advantageous points everywhere. Should you ask what made Bulgaria the determinant factor of the Balkans, I should certainly give this army as one reason and for the other I would give the Bulgarian people themselves.

If I should take a second sub-title for this article I would take Bulgaria. . . . the Germany of the Balkans. For there is much in the Bulgarian people to recall the Teuton, just as the Servian in many ways recalls the Frenchman. Frugal, industrious, temperate, with few brilliant qualities the Bulgar attains his desired end by sheer persistency. And with that go many qualities that make him a pleasant companion: he is hospitable to the last degree: lacks the assertive nationalism degenerating into distinct narrowness that so distinguishes the Servian, but is open to new light on any subject and from any source. The women, while generally ignorant, are splendid wives and mothers and are bringing up the new Bulgarian generation in all the virtues of the past.

Should you ask for the reverse of the picture I might name two evils which seemed to me present in Bulgaria. The first comes as the natural corollary of what I have said up to this time. Thirty years ago Bulgaria lacked national civilization or political life: today she has both. But such mushroom growth is almost always dangerous; it merely spreads a thin veneer of civilization over the nation, leaving the heart still untouched. Thus Sofia, with its fine public buildings and with its rows of hastily built, two-story houses, and at the same time its vacant lots full of rubbish and refuse and its dirty streets is emblematic of the successes and the failures of the new Bulgaria.

The other evil falls in much the same class. Just as the country has been rushed too fast culturally so it has been politically. In no capital of Europe are political lines so tightly drawn as in Sofia, nowhere are political leaders so full of the feeling that they and they only can save the country. With this feeling in mind they are willing to stoop to anything: assassination of an opposing statesman, political alliance with an outside power. But both these two courses are on the wane. As the country grows in civilization the first will utterly disappear, even now it is mainly limited to

the leaders of the Macedonian Committee, with whom the central government has little or no connection. The same may be said for outside alliance. Today that is the greatest danger that besets Bulgaria: that these foreign alliances with Bulgarian political parties may be made a pretext for interference in her affairs. But gradually there are growing up a coterie of leaders who have been trained in schools like Robert College, men to whom Bulgaria is all, who feel no need of outside help, who will rely on the sense of the Bulgarian nation and stand or fall with it. And that nation itself has not forgotten the lesson of self-reliance learned at Slivnitsa and may be depended upon to give such a nationalist policy strong support. The future, then, is full of hope.

There is much significance in the assumption by Ferdinand of the title "Emperor of all the Bulgars," for half that nation still dwell in Macedonia under the rule of Turkey. Moreover the dream of a Bulgaria, erected on its old limits from Salonika on the south to the Danube on the north, a dream realized at San Stefano and destroyed at Berlin, has not been forgotten and may be trusted to still appear before the Bulgarian statesmen of the future. And no student or even observer of Balkan affairs today doubts but that in a war between Bulgaria and Turkey the former will triumph. In military and financial resources, in steadiness of purpose and sense of unity she is distinctly superior to the Constantinople régime and, unless the New Turkish party accomplish the almost impossible and weld the diverse parts of the Turkish Empire into one homogeneous whole, she will continue to be so. But war with Turkey, for the present at least, is hardly probable. The eyes of Bulgarian statesmen are still turned toward internal development, and having attained the complete independence of the country they may be trusted to wait before taking further steps. For over twenty years Bulgaria waited between the annexation of Eastern Roumania and the declaration of complete independence from Turkey and this may be taken as a pledge that the progress of Bulgaria from step to step will be gradual and full security taken lest, pushing forward too hastily, they fall headlong to destruction.